Blending Buffers with Business

For Conservation, Cooperation, Enterprise Diversity, and Economic Stability

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Farmers working together to integrate on-farm conservation, with a landscape approach, to diversify farming operations.

Background

Beginning in 1973, the United States expanded international markets for agricultural commodities. To meet the increased demand, some farmers plowed highly erodible soils, wetlands, and other sensitive lands. In 1979, the U. S. closed a major international market. Commodity crop prices fell and farmers were faced with severe economic hardships, and some, with significant environmental problems. The 1985 Farm Bill provided the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) as one option to reduce commodity crop acreage and solve erosion problems. Under the CRP, over 34 million acres were removed from crop production and planted to grasses and trees (predominantly grasses). Along with the reduction in commodity crop production, these lands provided a cover for protection against erosion, habitat for many species of wildlife, and a rental payment for the farmer.

The 1996 Farm Bill contained provisions to phase out commodity crop price support payments. The purpose of CRP changed to focus more on environmental benefits and less on controlling commodity crop production. Some lands bid into CRP during the period from 1986 to 1996 are not eligible for re-enrollment into the new CRP program. With the elimination of commodity support payments and as previous CRP contracts expire and rental payments are lost, many farmers are considering plowing out their CRP lands to increase farm income with an increase in crop production.

Purpose

This technical release provides a conceptual framework for a landscape plan where individual farmers cooperate to maintain some land in permanent cover and accomplish what each farmer cannot do alone. They can integrate conservation measures on their farms to meet farm production goals, provide appropriate conservation of the natural resources, and diversify their farming operations to add new enterprises for the benefit of all.

This concept is applicable on almost any scale, with any number of farms involved, and is adaptable throughout most areas of the United States on most land uses.

Scenario

The four adjacent farms depicted in figure 1, somewhere in the Great Plains region of the United States, represent any area with any number of farms participating.

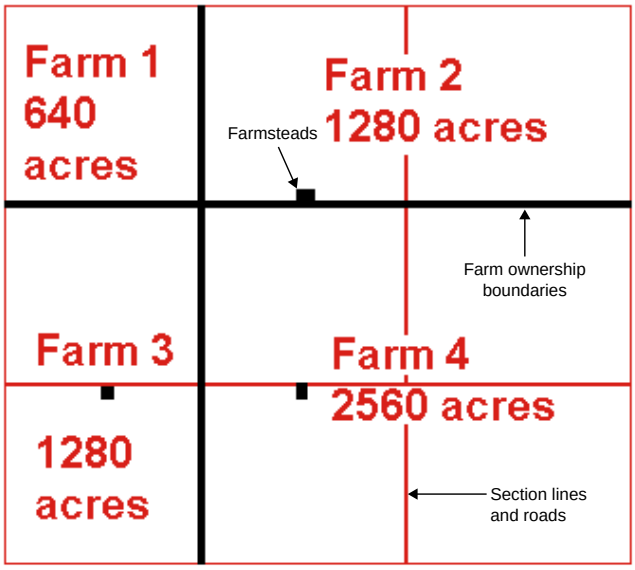

Figure 1. *Four farms somewhere in the Great Plains.*

Four were chosen to represent the concept of neighboring farmers working together to accomplish their production and conservation goals. The actual number of farms it would take to accomplish the objectives depends upon the size of the farms, the general topography and natural resource orientation, the actual goals being attempted, and other local conditions.

Figure 2 represents the general farming operations before 1985. Almost all available land was tilled on all farms with the exception of some woody areas along the stream and some annual set-aside acres. Erosion was occurring on much of the highly erodible soils, water quality was reduced by sediment, wildlife populations were minimal, and farm income depended upon crop production and commodity support payments. Crop production in this scenario is wheat, corn, and soybeans.

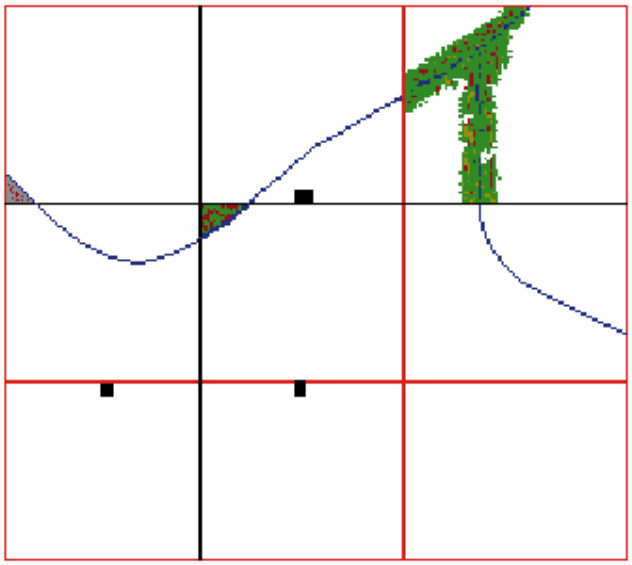

Figure 2*. Conditions prior to 1985 and participation in Conservation Reserve Program. Most fields were tilled from turnrow to turnrow. Some woody vegetation existed along streams on some farms.*

NOTE: No field-by-field detail is shown in figures 1 through 4. Obviously, areas such as roads, turnrows, field boundaries, and other areas of normal farming activities were and are still present.

Beginning in 1985, these four farmers began to plant significant portions of their farms in the CRP. Figure 3 illustrates the areas planted. Farmers continued to plant the same crops and implement conservation compliance plans, where applicable. Farm income came from crop production, commodity support, and CRP rental payments.

With as much as 25 percent of a county in CRP, the environmental benefits are significant. Soil erosion has been reduced, water quality improved in some areas, and wildlife habitat improved. On the four farms pheasants, white-tailed deer, songbirds, and other wildlife species use these areas for food, reproduction areas, and cover habitat. The numbers of these species have significantly increased on these farms.

Today the opportunity exists for these four farmers (and as many of their neighbors as possible) to work together to find economic incentives to maintain and/or increase conservation measures while meeting crop production goals as well as other individual goals.

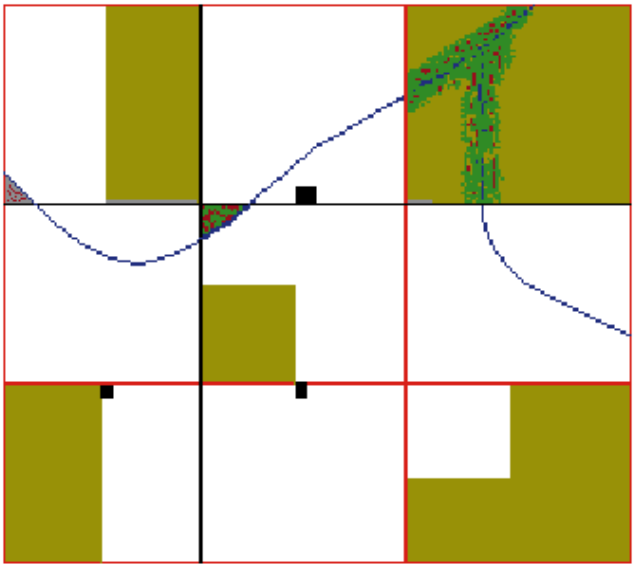

Figure 3. *Conditions after planting some fields of highly erodible soil with grass cover.*

In this scenario **these farmers realize that going back to their previous cropping from turnrow to turnrow will eliminate the wildlife habitat.** At the same time, they each realize that maintaining the habitat only on their individual farm will not be sufficient to keep the increased numbers of deer and pheasant they now have. Without these increases there will not be sufficient wildlife to hunt or even enjoy watching on a regular basis. **Working together is the only way this can happen.**

The farmers met and identified the following objectives:

- maintain or improve farm income
- increase agricultural production with traditional crops
- maintain and improve wildlife habitat, and
- keep wind and water induced erosion at acceptable levels

They concluded that all objectives can be met with the application of conservation measures in an integrated fashion across the landscape (see figure 4) and the initiation of fee-hunting enterprises through the formation of a wildlife management association comprised of their individual farms.

Figure 4 depicts a conservation combination the farmers could select and plan. Other equally viable plans could be developed with the following conservation measures as well as others that may be applicable:

- Riparian Forest Buffers
- Contour Buffer Strips
- Windbreaks and Shelterbelts
- Herbaceous Wind Barriers
- Field Borders
- Cross Wind Strips
- Contour Farming
- Grassed Waterways
- Residue Management
- Wildlife Upland Habitat Management
- Wildlife Wetland Habitat Management
- Maintenance of Permanent Vegetation
- Interseeding Grass with Legumes
- Prescribed Grazing and Fences could be used if a farmer chooses to maintain some grass areas and begin a livestock enterprise.

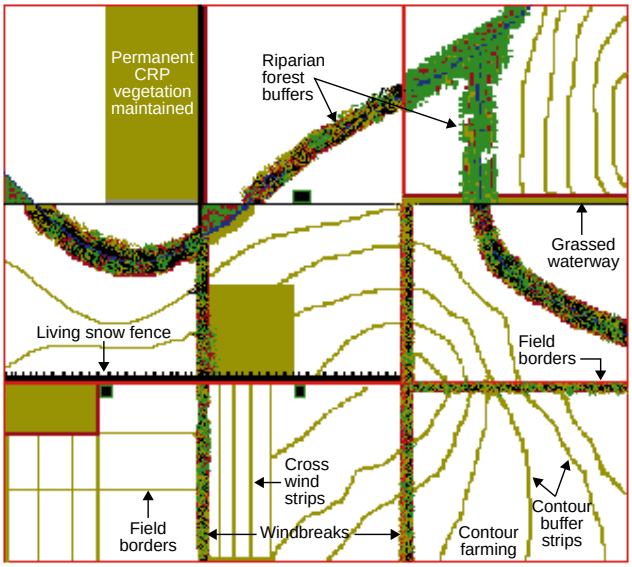

Figure 4. *Landscape-level conservation plan for the four farms. Each farmer determines the appropriate conservation plan that fits within his or her own farm objectives and within the landscape plan and the association's overall objectives. This is only one example of various levels of cooperation between and among the four farmers.*

The four farmers will begin a wildlife management association. They know that the larger the block of land that can be managed with sufficient wildlife habitat and adequate wildlife travel corridors, the greater the opportunities for an income-producing enterprise. In fact, several enterprises can be established, including deer hunting, pheasant hunting, bird watching, camping, and conservation and nature tourism. Significant income can be derived from these enterprises, providing economic incentive to maintain and increase conservation measures on their farms.

These farmers need to agree on numerous items in the establishment of their wildlife management association. Some of the items are:

- Management goals
- Conservation plan implementation schedules
- Hunter numbers and locations
- Hunting areas & control
- Annual inventory procedures
- Annual harvest recommendations
- Records maintenance
- Camping areas
- Areas of free access
- Pricing of hunting, camping, and other activities
- Fund management and allocation to members
- Meetings
- Membership (adding and deleting members)
- Written agreements or by-laws

By cooperating with each other and using a well-designed and appropriately implemented conservation plan for each farm that fits into a larger landscape-scale plan, these farmers are well on their way to meeting all their objectives.

Cooperation
Innovation
+ Conservation
= Success

For information

For information and assistance on developing a farm-level or landscape-level conservation plan, contact your local Natural Resource Conservation Service field office.

Eligibility for existing CRP land to be maintained in a program or any other specific program eligibility for any land must be determined at the local field office level. No eligibility inference is intended in this publication.